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SUBJECT: JUNE EDUCATION FAIRS DRAW THE BRAVE AND MOTIVATED --
TURKMENISTAN'S YOUTH

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SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) Throughout June post co-sponsored a series of successful education fairs in Ashgabat and with each region's American Corners.

The fairs, organized principally by implementing partner, American Councils (ACCELS), were successful despite almost no support, but also with no interference, from the Government of Turkmenistan. Attendance was high at most fairs as the American Corners filled up to and beyond capacity. The large turnout and numerous questions to speakers showed the public's continued strong interest in U.S. Government sponsored educational programming and resources. End Summary.

LACK OF ADVERTISING DOESN'T HOLD BACK ASHGABAT ED FAIR

¶12. (SBU) The June 3 Education Fair in the Ashgabat Children's Library (former National Library) kicked off the Fair series, drawing several hundred Turkmenistanis despite host government delays that hampered post advertising. The day-long series of seminars and presentations involved Embassy and implementing agency staff as well as representatives of nongovernmental organizations, local and international educational institutions and alumni of U.S. exchange programs. Attendees ranged from primary school age through older adult, with the bulk being of secondary school through college age -- came to the Fair over the course of the day, browsing the information booths that filled the library's ground floor, and attending the 21 presentations held later throughout the library. Post's key Ministry of Education working contact Nursahet Bayramov attended for the morning opening event, spoke to post's implementing partner representatives and took materials from several of the booths. The Public Affairs Section, USAID, the United Nations, embassy partner organizations ACCELS, IREX and the American Bar

Association (ABA/CEELI), local nongovernmental organizations and educational centers, as well as regional universities KIMEP (in Almaty) and the American University in Central Asia (in Bishkek) had information booths and provided consultations. KIMEP's presence at the Fair was the first in several years because of difficulties in obtaining a visa for Turkmenistan -- and allowed the university to publicize a new scholarship for Turkmenistani students. Attendees' questions during the seminars revealed a high level of knowledge of U.S. sponsored educational programs. (Note. Two students admitted that they and other students had avoided registering and completing surveys for fear of their participation being documented by the Government of Turkmenistan. Thus, reported attendance of 350 people at this event is probably lower than the actual number. End Note.)

TURKMENABAT EDUCATION FAIR

Turkmenabat's American Corner drew a standing-room-only crowd of about 150 people for its Fair on June 9. The half-day was boisterous and busy, drawing mostly teenagers with some English skills who were interested in post-high school level programs such as UGRAD, MUSKIE and TEA. A local community organization shuttled in about ten disabled youth toward the end of the day but otherwise most attendees came from Turkmenabat city -- resulting in a low percentage of ethnic Turkmen youth compared to that of Russian, Azeri, Uzbek and other minorities. A local official who has been a ringleader of harassment of USG programs and American Corner activities in the region, Kerimberdy Masharipov, turned out early in the day to escort the regional head of the Ministry of Education to the Fair. Though he sat quietly through two sessions, the Education Ministry chief was, in keeping with post's previous contact with him, wary of contact, but cordial and supportive of post's programs. Embassy, ACCELS, IREX, and American Corner staff gave presentations on educational programs until the late afternoon, followed by a debate tournament on educational issues organized by USG alumni. Masharipov stayed at the Corner until the end of the last activities; in the end he cornered several local teachers and threatened them about participating in U.S. Government teachers' exchange programs. (Note: Though one of the most heavily-trafficked Corners, Turkmenabat struggles with outreach to villages outside the capital because of sustained harassment of Corner visitors, students

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and teachers. End Note.)

MARY EDUCATION FAIR SIZZLES

¶13. (SBU) The Mary American Corner's director, staff, and volunteers displayed a continued ability to surpass expectations in their organization of the June 16 Mary Weleyat education fair. Despite the intense heat and lack of air-conditioning, superior word-of-mouth advertising and networking led to the highest and most diverse attendance of any regional education fair. Junior Faculty Development, Cochran, UGRAD, TASP, and FLEX program alumni attended along with over 150 other participants. Several students from the Mary Institute of Energy and Gas attended and eagerly asked when President Berdimuhamedov's announced technical exchanges would begin. The director secured access to another room that doubled the amount of panel discussions or presentations given and allowed more people to participate in the event. A "Neutral Turkmenistan" reporter covered the event by recording the Embassy representative's opening remarks, presentation on online education searches, and interviews with staff. (Note: The paper never published the article on this event. End Note.)

DASHOGUZ LACKS THE SPACE TO HOLD INTEREST IN FAIR

¶14. (SBU) The June 23 fair in the Dashoguz American Corner achieved a low attendance of 78 due to space shortages. The conference room's narrow shape and necessary furniture left little space for sitting or standing. Participants still eagerly consumed handouts and packed sessions out into the adjoining room. However, many people left frustrated that they couldn't adequately participate or simply turned away when seeing the crowd spilling outside of the

American Corner. A government representative quietly observed a few sessions and then left without incident.

TURKMENBASHY HOTEL HOSTS FAIR

¶15. (SBU) The last regional education fair took place in Turkmenbashy city, where the American Corner has been prevented from reopening since May 2006. Nonetheless, the event was a huge success, attracting more than 120 young adults, teachers, community activists, students, and NGO members -- and local government representatives -- to the Turkmenbashy Hotel. This was the most diverse audience gathered for the Turkmenbashy educational fair since its inception in 2004. The main conference hall seated 90 people but about 30 people stood throughout the fair's presentations by ACCELS, IREX, Public Affairs and USAID staff. The deputy head of the culture department of the Turkmenbashy city mayor's office attended the fair, talked pleasantly with Embassy officers and local staff, but left towards the end of the sessions without comment. After half an hour, the crowd had snatched up most of the paper handouts at the fair information booths. The information sessions ended with an alumni panel presentation about the education exchange experience -- from applying to programs through the re-entry to Turkmenistan -- by alumni of several U.S. sponsored exchange programs.

COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) Post outreach in education and to youth in Turkmenistan continues to flourish despite host government harassment, largely because of the presence of American Corners, active exchange program alumni in the regions, English language learning programs and resources, as well as the lack of other educational opportunities in Turkmenistan. The fairs also represented a chance to invite local government officials and further dispel suspicions commonly held about U.S. programming. However, limited Internet access and continued host government resistance to foreign ideas and programming -- as especially in Turkmenabat -- mean that the American Corners and post-sponsored activities such as education fairs continue to be crucial to mission outreach. The reopening of the Turkmenbashy American Corner would ensure even greater attendance at such events and help sustain mission programming in

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the ethnically diverse Balkan region. End Comment.

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